

MADNESS TO MEN
1 Corinthians 1:18-27

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Now, just answer these silently in your mind. Please don't raise your hand.

How many of you were Phi Beta Kappa? Maybe you graduated cum laude, magna cum laude or summa cum laude.

How many of you were Division I athletes at a prestigious university?

How many of you were winners of the Miss America pageant? Any homecoming queens here?

How many of you were listed in Who's Who or were voted "Most Likely to Succeed"?

Well, if you answered yes to any of these questions, I've got some good news for you. God can still use you, though He's going to have a little more difficulty using you than He is using common folk.

On the other hand, if you've not done or achieved the things the world prizes so highly, God is really going to delight in using you.

God desires to get glory through us. That is why, quite frankly, He seems to select ordinary folk.

So maybe you were not at the top of your class. That probably means you're just the kind of guy God wants to use to shake up the whole world. For with God, a relationship with Him is more important than scholarship with this world.

The story of Christ turns the wisdom of this world on its head.

A man hangs like a criminal on a cross. And we believe that in that event and in that person, God was at work in a way that He could forgive our sins for all eternity.

That's a strange story, isn't it? Really comes across as foolish to us. God has a habit of turning conventional wisdom on its head. The story of the death of Jesus, the crucified Messiah, is not a message that makes a lot of sense to those who are learned and esteemed, on the high hills or in the hallowed halls of the universities. In fact, those who are brilliant, those with the highest IQs, sometimes have the hardest time accepting the gospel.

Isn't life strange? Because some think they are so smart – they are just too smart to get there.

A child is born bright, and ever since he was a child those around him have made sure that he was aware of his special gifts. He struggles with a sense of elevated self-importance. He's prideful – and pride always tends to blind. Those with incredible minds find themselves in the universities where their paths are already cut. They must walk upon certain pre-established paths of thought. They have a reputation to maintain, and if they want to circulate among their august peers, they find it difficult to accept the story of the gospel. And since it's not acceptable to be religious, especially to be Christian, within those circles, many discount the story of Jesus without giving it a fair hearing.

In other ways, the gospel is too simple for this group. They have struggled with lofty, philosophical musings on the pathetic state of the human condition. Thus, they are understandably reluctant to believe that simply repenting of one's sins and following Christ could possibly be the answer. Foolishness. How could it be so easy?

Think of all the superior minds through the ages who have wrestled with these issues without arriving at a true solution to the problem. How could Christ be the answer when they are still trying to find the right question? ("Brilliant minds don't believe in Jesus," www.findhim.org/articles/21.htm)

Paul was writing to some of the same company in Corinth. He begins in verse 18 by saying, "The word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

The story of Jesus is madness to men.

I. God always works in God's own way.

God's ways rarely make sense to humanity. His thoughts are so high above our thoughts, His ways so high above our ways – how could we even expect to understand the plan of God? Paul says to the wise philosophers of Corinth: "So you think the gospel is a form of wisdom? How foolish can you get? Look at its message. It's based upon the story of a crucified Messiah, a savior who, himself, dies. Who, in the name of wisdom, would have ever dreamed that up? Only God is so wise as to be so foolish."

Did it make any sense for Sarah, when Abraham was 100 years of age and she herself was way beyond bearing years, to give birth to a son, a son of promise named Isaac? That's not the way of the world. That's the way of God.

Would you have ever made a bet on David when he had to fight the giant Goliath. A sling shot and a stone against the grandest armor of the Philistines. A child against the Herculean hero of Philistia. But it was God's way.

Does it make any sense when you're going into battle, as Gideon went to battle, for God to say, "Reduce the army; we have too many. Send the warriors away. I want to win this one with the few, not the many." It doesn't make any sense to cut your troops down.

Does it make any sense for the Messiah to be born the son of a poor Jewish carpenter in the insignificant city of Bethlehem in a cave because there is no room for Him in this world? Not the way we would have done it – never, ever, would have planned it that way.

God's ways have never made sense to man. And the gospel makes the least sense of all. The Jewish people have longed so long for a Messiah, a new Moses, a deliverer, to come who would lead them out of the oppression of foreign nations, out of the oppression of Rome, much as Moses had led them out from the oppression of Egypt. They had longed for the one who would bring new manna, new hope, new power to God's people.

How does it make sense when that Messiah shows up – an untrained rabbi with a handful of ruffians for followers, saying that the good news of the kingdom of God is not just for Israel but for all people, Jew and Gentile alike. He said if you want to save your life you must lose it, if you want to be first, you must be willing to be last, and the greatest of all is a servant. And then watch Him as this so-called Savior can't even save Himself, it seems, because He is nailed with His knuckles against the crossbeam of the cross.

It doesn't make sense. It's foolishness.

The cross stands as an absolute, uncompromising, contradiction to human wisdom. In verse 19, we have an Old Testament quotation from Isaiah 29. "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside." This passage comes from the judgment oracle against Judah. The wisest of Judah had said that they would not survive unless they made an alliance with Egypt, a pagan nation. But their worldly wisdom failed, and in fact their clever statecraft came to naught because their alliance with Egypt so alarmed Assyria that it sparked the invasion they sought to avoid. God allowed the city of Jerusalem to be besieged and then sent an angel who – the one angel, alone, in the night – killed 185,000 Assyrians. And the pagan army fled in fear.

God's ways are madness to men. The Jews want signs (v. 22). Like before, when they were under foreign oppression, Moses brought many signs at the time of the Exodus – the water turned to blood, the sea stood on its head, and his staff became a serpent. They want more signs that this, indeed, is the new Messiah. The Messiah should be a man of power, not a man of death. The Greeks, in their proverbial love of learning, were looking for wisdom. They wanted things presented in a logical, compelling manner. To them, the Messiah should be a wise teacher of philosophical truths.

But no, God has blown away all apparently reasonable criteria, for the Messiah turned out to be a crucified criminal. The death of the rabbi Jesus on the cross is the event of salvation for the whole world? Why, one would have to be a fool to believe that! And yet that is precisely what the gospel declares.

II. The world's wisdom is sadly empty. (v. 20-21, 25)

We really do some dumb things in life, don't we? I heard a story about a man who tried to siphon gasoline from a motor home parked on a Seattle street at the height of escalated fuel prices. But he got much more than he bargained for. The police arrive at the scene to find a man ill, curled up

next to a motor home near spilled sewage. He had plugged his hose into the motor home's sewage tank instead of the gas tank. The owner said he wouldn't press any charges because it was the best laugh he'd ever had.

Or what about the lady who had a new computer and called the technical support line because things weren't functioning as they should. The technician's first words of advice were, "You need to open a window to launch the program." Finally, after time, the lady asked if she could close her windows because it was getting too chilly in the room.

Or Dr. Erich Ritter, a professor at Hofstra University, who saw his experiment with sharks go terribly awry when he was attacked while standing in bait-littered water. Dr. Ritter had convinced himself that yoga-like breathing would slow his heart rate, convincing the sharks he was a fellow predator. What! (*Men's Fitness Magazine*)

Or how about Luke Goodrich in San Jose, California, who was burning garbage out back of his home – which is, by the way, against the law. But while he was burning his garbage, the fire got away from him and spread over 100 acres. It took six helicopters and 400 firefighters to put it out. By the way, Luke Goodrich is captain of the San Jose Fire Department.

The American historian Will Durant defined education as “a progressive discovery or our own ignorance.” We can add up all the knowledge in this room and compared to the all-knowing God we are nothing. And we know nothing. And the more I study life, the more I read, and the more I learn, I realize just how ignorant I really am.

Sometimes I feel like the football player at Florida State. Bobby Bowden, the then-coach of the Florida State Seminoles, speaking about one of his star linebackers, said, “He doesn't know the meaning of the word fear. In fact, I just saw his grades, and he doesn't know the meaning of a lot of words.”

As an educated culture, we know more today than we have ever known before. And yet we still don't know anything. All a really good education does is teach you how to ask the right questions, learn where to search for answers, and learn how to organize ideas and thoughts. In the end, it is all for naught compared to the wisdom of God.

III. Everything is level at the foot of the cross.

Look at verses 26-29.

For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, that no man should boast before God.

Eugene Peterson translated the passage this way: “Take a good look, friends, at who you were when you got called into this life. I don't see many of the brightest and the best among you, not many influential, not many from high society families.”

The ground at the foot of the cross is level. It's not for the best. It's not for the brightest. It's for those called by God to understand the word of the cross. In fact, Jesus' ministry tended to attract more sinners than saints.

First, Paul says, when we look around at who is called into God's camp, we have the foolish things or the "foolish" ones (verse 27). The word here Paul uses is *moros*. It's where we get our word moron – someone who is dull, sluggish, maybe even somewhat silly. God has chosen those kind of folks to do His work.

Secondly, he says there are the "weak" ones (verse 27) whom God has chosen to use. This word represents physical weakness, even infirmity. You feeling weak and sick? Well, congratulations. God is going to do mighty things with and through your frail body, that His strength is made perfect in your weakness. You remember the Apostle Paul had a thorn in the flesh, an infirmity? God used him to be a most important apostle.

And then there are the "base" ones (verse 28). That means those of lowly birth, ignoble, without pedigree. Maybe you're not part of the aristocracy. Not born with a silver spoon in your mouth? You're just the kind of man or woman God is after.

Next He uses the "despised" ones. These are the ones the world would write off as of no account. Are you treated with contempt and scorn by others? Do some say you'll never amount to anything? That's terrific! You're just the one that God will be able to use.

Finally, and last of all, he says God uses the ones who "are not." This refers to people who are completely overlooked. They don't even get despised. They're not even considered good enough to be scorned. They're not listed in Who's Who. They're listed in the Who's Not. No, this person is not discussed as good or evil. They are unknown. They're alone. They are a nobody.

Why does God use ordinary folks to change the world? Because He doesn't want anyone boasting about their own strength. God gives ordinary people extraordinary power to do His will.

There is just such a story that one preacher remembers. They had something called The Week of Champions. They were trying to reach the young people in the area for Christ. They had professional and amateur athletes of the highest caliber come and share their testimonies for Christ. The whole event took place in the high school gymnasium. And among those great athletes who came was the late Paul Anderson. At the time he was reputed to be the strongest man in the world. What a specimen he was. He had biceps the size of coconuts. Two time national champion in Olympic wrestling.

He was asked, "Were you ever a 97-pound weakling?" He said, "Yes, when I was four years old."

The students laughed.

Anderson's testimony was clear and strong. He said, in effect, "If the strongest man in the world needs Jesus, so do you."

The next Sunday morning the pastor remembers that a young man came forward in the church to confess Christ publicly as Lord and Savior. After visiting with him, the pastor says he found out the young man was converted the night Paul Anderson was present.

"What was it Mr. Anderson said that touched your heart?" the pastor asked.

"Oh it wasn't the strong man, it wasn't Paul Anderson," the student said. "It was George Wilson that reached me."

George Wilson? The pastor couldn't even remember which athlete he was. Then he remembered. George was a paraplegic in a wheelchair who gave his testimony during a time of open sharing afterwards. He wasn't even part of the official program. But he spoke of the joy of the Lord with a face shining like the noonday sun. The teenager said to the pastor, "When I saw the happy expression on the face of George Wilson, I thought that if God could do that for a man in a wheelchair, perhaps He could do something for me." (Adrian Rogers, "Christian Life: Inhabited or Inhibited?", www.preaching.com)

On the night that the strongest man in the world was sharing Jesus, God used a man in a wheelchair to bring a college student to Christ.

It doesn't matter. In this room this morning or watching by way of television – if you've got an eighth grade education or a Ph.D., it makes no difference. You cannot be wise enough to find God. At the foot of the cross, all things are equal. At the foot of the cross, we are all exactly the same. Sinners before a holy God, seeking His face and finding it through the story of a crucified Christ.

IV. The gospel is the power of God.

Look at verse 23: "We preach Christ crucified." Notice verse 24, "...[it is] the power of God and the wisdom of God." Look at verse 18. "To those who are being saved the gospel, the word of the cross is the power of God."

Paul is saying to the wise ones in Corinth that this story about Jesus is not another competing school of philosophy. There were some in Corinth who had a tendency to see Paul and the other Christian preachers as rhetoricians who were competing for public attention and approval alongside other popular philosophers. Paul's forceful rebuttal is designed to reframe the categories of the debate and put the gospel in a category apart from all the other varieties of wisdom on offer in the popular marketplace of ideas. The gospel is not some esoteric body of religious knowledge. It's not a slickly packaged philosophy. It's not a scheme for living a better life. Instead, it's an announcement that God has intervened in human history, that God, through the crucifixion of Christ Jesus, has saved the world.

And it is the power of God to those who believe. One thing about the cross is clear: The cross divides all of humanity into two groups, those who are perishing and those who are being saved. Those who see the gospel as foolishness are perishing. And those who see the gospel as the power of God are being saved.

The gospel is the power of God.

Everything about the gospel contradicts human wisdom

- that in giving up His life, Jesus led us all to everlasting life if we believe in Him;
- that in becoming a servant He displayed that He is Lord of Lords and King of Kings;
- that the one who is innocent would be crucified between two criminals;
- that those who are not religious are the ones most likely to embrace God's Son.

It's a paradox. It's an irony. But it's God's way.

The gospel is the power of God. We're all equal at the foot of the cross.

Today, if you don't have hope, the gospel is the power of God.

Today, if you're fearful, the gospel is the power of God.

Today, if you are rattled by uncertainty, the gospel is the power of God.

Today, if you feel unloved, the gospel is the power of God.

We're here today, holding high the cross because the gospel is the power of God.